ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE I Part IV

LOS ANGELES TIMES
15 June 1986

White House vs. Press: Matters of Patriotism?

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WASHINGTON

The dispute between the Reagan Administration and the press over coverage of the trial of Ronald W. Pelton, convicted of selling U.S. secrets to the Soviet Union, raises an important question: Why does virtually every Administration end up fighting with the press over coverage of national security matters?

Many in the press would have us believe that there is something in White House food that turns every Administration into an opponent of the First Amendment. Some Administration officials seem to suggest that the press corps is an almost criminal class, anxious to sell out the country for a good story.

Neither the Administration nor the press, however, addresses the fundamental problem—the very real conflict between the perceived demands of national security and the established obligations of journalism.

In moments of extreme crisis national security permits, even honors, otherwise dishonorable actions, from deceit up to murder, that contribute to the nation's survival. For centuries scoundrels have exploited this, claiming crisis where none existed to justify vile acts.

Journalism is more neutral. It reports actions that have taken place and the reasons policy-makers offer. It leaves to the reader judgments as to whether these actions are right or wrong.

Press neutrality can be dangerous, particularly when reporting is incorrect. In Ronald Reagan's first term, false U.S. press reports that America had launched a covert operation against the Libyan government caused Moammar Kadafi to threaten retaliation, publicly. Soon the press was filled with reports, never substantiated, that a Libyan hit squad was on its way to assassinate the President.

Two developments, however, have made the problem of covering national security issues more acute. The first is the steady blurring of the distinction between peace and war. Frederick the Great of Prussia used to maintain that civilians should not even be aware when a state of war existed. In the days of monarchy and mercenary armies that was possible. But increasingly, the distinction between peace and war has been erased as governments mobilize ever larger portions of their populations over ever longer periods of time for the purposes of war. Now, in an era of enduring hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union, some contend that America must follow the requirements of war in times of formal peace. And in war, the press is censored.

In the postwar era, facing a new type of challenge, Administrations have sought to conduct wars without formal declarations from Congress. They have also wanted greater control over the press without seeking the proper legislation. And in fact they have been able to prevail upon the press not to reveal and the Congress not to investigate developments that otherwise each would rush to expose. Everyone knows that some major newspapers knew of the pending invasion of Cuba during the Kennedy Administration, but for reasons of national security did not print it. Both the press and the Congress looked the other way, for many years, regarding dubious Central Intelligence Agency operations, until a record of botched assassinations and misguided subornations broke into the open and humiliated the nation. To this day, though documents are available, few in the United States know about the numerous, poorly conceived clandestine operations in Eastern Europe during the 1950s that do not justify but help explain some harsh

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Soviet response to U.S. actions on the European continent.

The executive branch has always been especially sensitive about cryptography—and for good reason. The father of U.S. cryptography, Herbert Osborne Yardley, who broke the Japanese code during Washington naval limitation talks in 1921-22, could only carry on his operation by persuading Western Union to violate U.S. law, in giving him copies of diplomatic messages. When Henry J. Stimson became secretary of state in 1929, he was outraged to learn that government agencies were consciously violating the law. He closed down Yardley's unit. When Yardley later tried to publish a book on his unit's achievements, the government conspired to prevent publication.

The agency that now attempts to read other governments' messages is the National Security Agency, where Pelton worked. It remains the most secretive U.S. agency.

But there is another reason for the degree of tension between Administrations and the press. Up through World War II, Administrations could count on much of the press to serve as a patriotic cheerleader, often to a disgraceful degree. In a remarkable book about American attitudes toward the Japanese during World War II, John W. Dover documents the racist approach of the press. Major newspapers regularly referred to the Japanese as subhuman.

Today it is almost inconceivable that the American press would cover any conflict the way it covered the conflict with Japan. The most anti-Soviet journal is not anti-Russian. Even during the Iranian hostage crisis, when the evidence of foreign irrationality seemed at historic heights, the American press tried hard to maintain some emotional distance.

To a besieged Administration, the shift is not an improvement. It is probably no accident that the two recent secretaries of state, Dean Rusk and George P. Shultz, who have criticized press coverage of foreign conflicts, both served in the Pacific in World War II.

Against this background there is no clean solution to the problem of press coverage of national security issues. As long as the Soviet Union poses a unique threat to U.S. security and particularly while a significant portion of the American public believes the Soviet Union is determined to conquer the world, coverage involving national security will be a source of tensions.

One answer is to acknowledge that American press coverage does cause some damage—and then put it in perspective. Administrations are right: At the conceptual level there can be a serious conflict between the requirements of national security and those of journalism. But the press is also right, pointing out that Administration after Administration has exploited the conflict not to protect national security but its own reputation.

Occasionally the American press will publish details in the field of national security of use to the Soviet Union. But the real damage to national security through a policy of openness has been small in the cases that have most aroused the executive branch. For all the fire and smoke that the Nixon Administration created over the Pentagon papers and the Reagan Administration over Pelton trial details, any objective observer would have to admit that the security loss was tiny compared to the other sources of information available to the Soviet Union. We are an open society. In addition, earlier spies like Geoffrey Arthur Prime in England or Christopher Boyce in California turned over more valuable information than any that the press provides through "speculation" on details from the Pelton trial.

This Administration and its successors would serve the country better by erring on the side of openness. Our objective should be to open up Soviet society not close our own. True national security rests on a politically healthy Republic. □

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